

A new form of thrush babbler *Ptyrticus* sp. from the Bakossi Mountains, Cameroon?

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Un nouveau taxon de grive-akalat *Ptyrticus* sp. dans les Monts Bakossi, Cameroun ? En 1998, un couple d'oiseaux non identifiés a été vu par deux fois dans la forêt des Monts Bakossi : il pourrait s'agir d'un nouveau taxon de grive-akalat *Ptyrticus* sp.

The Bakossi Mountains, in western Cameroon, lie c.15 km west of Mount Manenguba and north-west of Mount Kupe. With Mount Cameroon and Mount Oku, the Bakossis are one of the three most important sites for the conservation of local bird endemics along the Cameroon chain, with a very large area of forest (F. Dowsett-Lemaire in Fotso *et al.* 2001). The forest covers an altitudinal range of 150–1,800 m, with c.200 km² of mid-altitude and montane forest (above 1,000 m), and nearly twice that area of lowland rain forest in the south-west. The 'Edib Hills' in the centre lie mostly between 1,100 and 1,450 m and receive very high rainfall, probably >5,000 mm p.a. A few surveys in the late 1990s and in 2000 identified at least 330 bird species. The central forests have important populations of, *inter alia*, the globally threatened Mount Kupe Bushshrike *Malaconotus kupeensis*, Green-breasted

Bushshrike *M. gladiator* and White-throated Mountain Babbler *Kupeornis gilberti* (Faucher 1999, Dowsett-Lemaire & Dowsett 2000).

In 1998 IF spent nearly eight months in the field studying primates, especially Drill *Mandrillus leucophaeus* and Preuss's Monkeys *Cercopithecus preussi*. She also took notes on other mammals, and birds (Faucher 1999). On two occasions, in October and November, she observed a bird species that she was unable to identify: each time, a pair was involved, hopping on the ground and over logs in a 'follow-my-leader' fashion. This was under closed canopy, in primary forest at c.1,100 m, within 1 km of her base camp near Edib. The base camp was c.2 km south-west of Lake Edib (04°57'N 09°38'E). The forest in that area consists of a 30-m tall canopy where stilt-rooted *Uapaca* and *Santiria trimera* are conspicuous, as well as *Pycnanthus angolensis* and *P. marchalianus*,



Figure 1. Painting of a possible new form of thrush babbler *Ptyrticus* sp. seen in the Bakossi Mountains, Cameroon (Isabelle Faucher)

Peinture représentant peut-être un nouveau taxon de grive-akalat *Ptyrticus* sp. vu dans les Monts Bakossi, Cameroun (Isabelle Faucher)

tall Rubiaceae, Sapotaceae, various Guttiferae and Caesalpiniaceae; the understorey is fairly open.

Fig. 1 shows a painting of the bird. It was seen under good conditions, as the observer was sitting quietly watching monkeys. Given several characters of the plumage (warm chestnut and uniform upperparts, details of the head, with a distinctive line of pale feathers in front of the eye and mottled cheeks), and the behaviour, this appears to be a kind of thrush babbler *Ptyrticus* sp. However, there are important differences from the only known species of the genus, Spotted Thrush Babbler *P. turdinus*, especially the underparts: in the Bakossi bird they are spotted throughout, rather than the spotting being restricted to the breast, and the spots are darker brown. Spotted Thrush Babbler has a circum-Congo distribution, being locally common in forest patches in the forest/savanna transition zones on both sides of the equator, from Angola and Zambia to central Cameroon (Fry *et al.* 2000). The forest at Bakossi belongs to another biome, as it is within the Guineo-Congolian forest zone *sensu stricto*, intergrading with montane forest of the Afromontane region.

It is probable that we are dealing with a new form, possibly a new species, of thrush babbler. The Bakossi range and adjacent mountains are very rich in endemic species of plants (Cheek *et al.* 2004) and animals. A new frog, *Leptodactylodon wildi*, was discovered in 1998 near Kodmin in the eastern Bakossi Mountains (Amiet & Dowsett-Lemaire 2000) and later also near Edib (pers. obs.). M. Cheek and colleagues discovered several new species of trees and shrubs in the late 1990s (Cheek *et al.* 2004). Near Edib IF observed (and painted) what appeared to be a new species of duiker *Cephalophus* sp. (the size of Bay Duiker *C. dorsalis*, with thinner legs, different coloration and striking white spectacles around the eyes) and an apparently new species of squirrel (Faucher 1999).

The mystery bird is evidently rather rare. FDL and R. J. Dowsett did not come across it during six weeks of field work (in March–April 1998, February 1999, March 2000). In March 2000 in particular, they spent a week at IF's base camp to look for this bird, RJD erecting 300 m of mist-nets. FDL never heard anything that might have resembled the song of Spotted Thrush Babbler; however, March–April coincides with the start of

the rains, a time when some birds may become quiet as they are moulting. No additional field work has been undertaken in the region, we believe, since the year 2000, although the Bakossi Mountains are still visited most years by bird tours for very brief periods. By 2000 the central and northern areas of the massif were relatively intact, given the very low human population pressure, but there was increasing encroachment into the lowlands for cash crops such as cocoa, and a new road along the south-eastern edge was being re-opened, which could have encouraged new settlements.

This note is published in the hope that it will encourage further field work in the area and help reveal the identity of this mysterious bird.

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